

Kipp Hamilton

Hollywood's Irish Lass

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While watching the recent Academy Awards, I noticed an emphasis on diversity. There were blondes, brunettes, plus-sized, and other features among these performers. I was saddened to see that there were almost no performers from Hollywood's Golden Age invited to the ceremony.

This made me think of honoring Golden Age performers who definitely deserve to be remembered even though their careers never made them famous, and I settled on Kipp Hamilton. One of the rare genuine redheads in Hollywood, she was frequently seen on television before retiring in the late 1960s. She passed away at the early age of 46. She was decidedly talented, so let's take a look back at this delightful lady.

Rita Marie Hamilton was born on August 16, 1934, in Los Angeles to Joseph H. and Marie Hamilton. She was the youngest of six children, one of whom would become the well-known actor, writer, and producer Joe Hamilton. Rita attended Hollywood High School where she did drama and a cappella choir. Her teacher recommended that she audition for a supporting part in *Our Very Own* (1950), an adolescent-themed drama of an adopted daughter, played by star Ann Blyth, being filmed in West Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn.





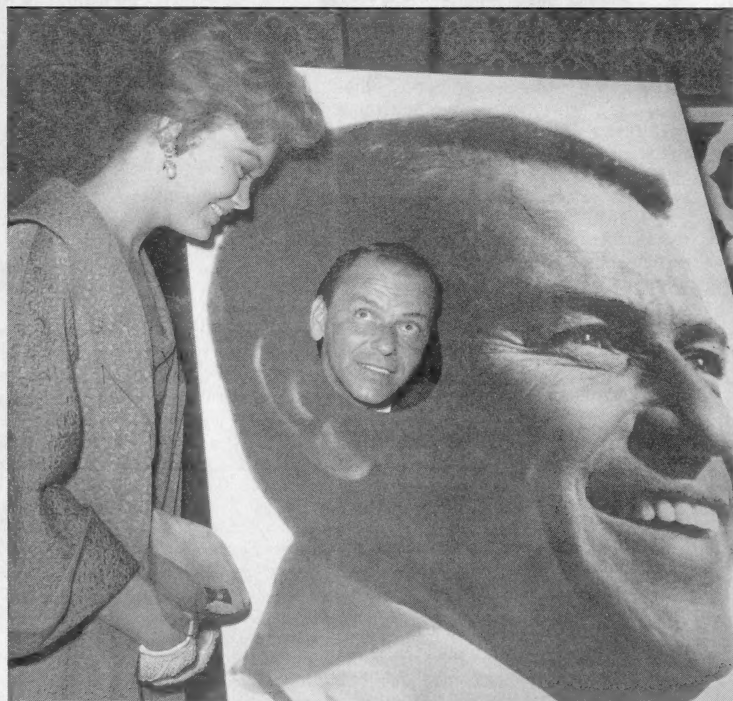
Kipp Hamilton and Robert Stack in *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1955).



Glenda Farrell (left) is "The Marriage Broker" and can't help arranging a meeting between William Bishop, a dentist, and pretty Kipp Hamilton. This 1957 episode of *The 20th Century-Fox Hour* was based on the movie *The Model and the Marriage Broker* (1951).



In this scene from *Never So Few* (1959), Frank Sinatra seems very interested in what Kipp has to say (they were seeing each other off-screen, as well), as Richard Johnson and Steve McQueen concentrate on their drinks.



Frank Sinatra (sticking his head out of a cutout) and Kipp at a promotional event for the film *A Hole in the Head* (1959).



The reviews were positive, with critic Kate Cameron saying that “Rita Hamilton adds to the stint of laughter and tears provoked by the domestic situation of this middle-class American family.”

The teenage Rita was subsequently signed by MGM, who had plans to transform her into a 1950s version of Shirley Temple. Unfortunately, that idea was scrapped, and she didn’t appear in anything they produced. A year later, she was released from her contract, and then worked in regional theatre. Enrolled at Loyola University, she studied drama and was in the choir. While doing occasional television appearances on *Fireside Theatre* and *Robert Montgomery Presents*, she performed in several stage productions, such as *The Vagabond King* and *The Imaginary Invalid*.

After some positive reviews for her on-

stage performances, she was offered a seven-year contract at \$250 a week with 20th Century-Fox. The studio was searching for a redhead something like Columbia’s Rita Hayworth. Kipp—the new name the studio gave her—was assigned a substantial supporting role in *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (1955) as Jincey Baker, a confused adolescent who is given direction and wisdom from teacher Miss Dove (Jennifer Jones) and then goes on to marry the Robert Stack character. After filming concluded, Jones said, “That girl [Kipp] is a marvelous actress.” Following that was *Bigger Than Life* (1956), where she played schoolteacher Pat Wade who engages in friendly banter with James Mason. She guested on two episodes of *20th Century-Fox Hour* (“Christopher Bean” and “The Marriage Broker”) and won several publicity titles, including Miss Op-



Above: Audie Murphy and Kipp Hamilton in John Huston’s *The Unforgiven* (1960). **Left:** In 1959-60, Kipp portrayed Stevie Martin on four episodes of *The Texan* starring Rory Calhoun.

tometry, Deb Star, and *The Sweetest Girl in Hollywood*.

20th Century-Fox, however, lost interest in Kipp. With the popularity of television causing cutbacks at the studios, she was released from her contract by mutual agreement. Although thankful for the two movie roles, she resented Fox’s decision to change her name from Rita to Kipp, saying in an interview, “Kipp sounds like a sun-burn lotion.”

She tested for roles in *Carousel* (1956) and *Silk Stockings* (1957), but in the end she was turned down. Instead, she appeared in *Can-Can* at the Civic Playhouse, *The Seven-Year Itch* at the Tustin Playbox, and *Finian’s Rainbow* at the Coconut Grove. Although regional theatre was not as lucrative or noteworthy as films, Kipp enjoyed it as it gave her the opportunity to use talents

beyond acting.

Kipp was cast in *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent* (1957), a low-budget flick directed by the legendary Roger Corman. In what was the beginning of a lot of unfortunate advice given by her agent, Kipp missed the first day of filming, however, and eventually backed out of the production. This was in part because her agent, Lillian Small, told her that doing a low-budget movie wouldn’t be good for her already-blossoming career. Although there might have been some truth to this, the incident labeled Kipp as unreliable. Corman was furious, later saying, “I’ve got nothing good to say about her. She didn’t show up, so I replaced her. That’s how I operate.”



(Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)



(Courtesy of Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)



(Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)



A glamour portrait from when Kipp was under contract to 20th Century-Fox.



Kipp Hamilton in a publicity still for the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Hamilton

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On television, Kipp acted on episodes of *Perry Mason*, *Mike Hammer*, *The Adventures of McGraw*, *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*, *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, *The Lineup*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Rawhide*, and *Westinghouse Playhouse*. In 1959-60 she had a brief recurring role in Rory Calhoun's western series *The Texan*.

In *Never So Few* (1959), she appeared alongside Frank Sinatra, and the two began a months-long romance giving her the opportunity to rub elbows with Peter Lawford, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr., until the romance cooled. She continued to do movies, such as *The Unforgiven* (1960), where she was given a chance to sing onscreen.

A talent scout heard her and asked her to audition for the Broadway musical *Donnybrook!*, which was based on *The Quiet Man*. She was cast in the leading role of Ellen Roe Danaher opposite Art Lund. Unlike Hollywood, Broadway was strict in its rehearsals. Kipp had a lot of difficulties keeping up with the dialogue, choreography, and lyrics. Unfortunately, she had a case of pneumonia days before the New York premiere, May 18, 1961, and her understudy stepped in. Although she eventually recovered from her illness, she was persuaded by her agent to not return to the production because the reviews were poor. The show folded after 68 performances. Joan Fagan, Kipp's understudy, remembers during rehearsals, "We saw that she struggled to keep up with us. Broadway is very different from the movies. The material is tougher and you have to learn it faster. She seemed to lose interest as we got closer to opening night. I didn't think that she was a super great singer, but she was a phenomenal actress. That's what producers wanted—someone who could put a lot of acting into their singing."

On February 14, 1962, Kipp married director Dave Geisel, whom she had met on the set of *The Garry Moore Show* which her brother Joe Hamilton produced. They had a daughter, Marie, in 1963.

Tensions arose among the family when Kipp's brother Joe married actress Carol Burnett in May 1963. Kipp, who had been close with her brother's former wife Gloria, penned an article in *Catholic Digest* opposing the marriage, and she even stayed with Gloria for months during the ordeal.

Since her career in Hollywood had stalled, Kipp ventured into theatre hoping to salvage her reputation as an actress. In 1963-64, she was in the touring production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

In 1965, the year she and Geisel divorced, Kipp made her comeback. She



Kipp Hamilton sings "The Words Get Stuck In My Throat" in *The War of the Gargantuas* (1966)



Tom Tully and Kipp Hamilton in "The Murdered Blonde Case," a 1959 episode of *The Lineup*.

enrolled in acting classes with Stella Adler to strengthen her performances, and appeared on *Bewitched* (as Pleasure O'Riley), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Burke's Law*, *The Wild Wild West*, *My Brother the Angel*, *My Three Sons*, *Family Affair*, *The Phyllis Diller Show*, *Dragnet* 1967 and *The Virginian*, and had a part in the film *Harlow* (1965) starring Carroll Baker. Kipp had become a sought-after actress on television, as her range was remarkable.



(Courtesy of Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)



Kipp Hamilton and Elizabeth Montgomery on the *Bewitched* episode "Pleasure O'Riley" (1965).



Kipp's last screen appearance was in *The Virginian* episode "The Fortress" (1967).

Kipp's last movie appearance was in the Japanese Kaiju *The War of the Gargantuas* (1966) starring Russ Tamblyn. Billed as Special Guest Star, Kipp's iconic role, according to her daughter Marie, was intended to be larger. Still, Kipp stole the attention by singing the memorable "The Words Get Stuck in My Throat." Tamblyn later said that Kipp's singing was "the best part of the movie." Shortly before his death, the movie's producer, Henry G. Saperstein, was interviewed by John Rocco Roberto, and he remembered Kipp fondly: "I was looking for a singer with a certain kind of look to her. I knew her brother Joe Hamilton, the producer who married Carol Burnett. He suggested her. I auditioned her; she was a very personable and very cooperative young lady, and we hired her. She was a professional."

In 1968, after she married attorney Donald Thorman Rosenfeld, Kipp left Hollywood and dedicated her life to her family. The couple settled in Beverly Hills, and they had a daughter named Dana who later became a publicist for the Walt Disney Company. While raising her children, Kipp occasionally did roles in regional theatre productions like *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She hosted some of Hollywood's most exclusive parties, and was good friends with many of Hollywood's A-list families. Eventually, she and her brother resolved their differences and became very close. Marie



Glamour pose (courtesy of Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)

and Dana remember Carol Burnett as being a loving aunt who would often be with them on birthdays and holidays.

Surrounded by her family, a 46-year-old Kipp passed away from breast cancer on January 29, 1981. She is interred at Holy Cross Cemetery, mourned by her family, friends, and colleagues alike.

Kipp has her tickets for the premiere of Fox's *Carousel* (1956). (Robert Rotter/Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen)

